MITHILĀ AS DESCRIBED IN THE UPANIṢADS

By

Sri Brajdeo Prasad Roy

The Upaniṣads deal with the philosophical thoughts of our sages of ancient times and are the symbols of the high intellectual and mental calibre of ancient Indian thinkers in the fields of religion and philosophy. The upaniṣadic literature is the mirror of the society and philosophers consciously or unconsciously draw something physical from the society in order to set examples for clarifying their principles. From them we know that the great Janakas of Mithilā were not only the sovereigns of the temporal world ruling over an extensive empire but were the unchallenged masters of the philosophical thoughts also, and it fell on the Upaniṣadic sages to preserve their memory in their respective works, wherein we have naturally many references to Mithilā.

The ancient name of Mithilā was Videha country as it was discovered and inhabited by Videha Madhava as is known from the Śat. Br.[1] The name Mithilā came to be known later after the name of the King Mithi. The Vālmikiya Rāmāyaṇa[2] reveals the same fact regarding the name of Mithilā. Janaka, the son and grandson of Mithi and Nimi respectively became so prominent that his family afterwards was known after his name and in the Upaniṣadic literature the proper names of the Kings of his line are not so cautiously mentioned. In the Bṛd. only, which is one of the most ancient Upaniṣads, we got the name of Mithilā always as the Videha[3] country and never as the former. In the *Kauṣītaki Br.*,[4] the name of the country of Janak is mentioned as Videha. The name Mithilā does not occur in the earliest Upaniṣads, and besides these two, none of the Upaniṣads has any reference to the Videhadeśa. In some later Upaniṣads like that of the *Mahopaniṣada*[5] Janak has been mentioned as the king of Mithilā. It seems that the ancient name Mithilā *i.e.* Videha was very popular during the time of the Upaniṣads and the new name Mithilā till then was not so very popular.

---

1. Sat. Br. 1. 4, 1. For details, cf. Upendra Thakur, History of Mithilā, chap. I.
2. Vāl. Rām. 1. 71, 3-4.
3. Brd. 2. 1, 1., 3. 1, 1., 3. 8, 1 – 12.
4. Kansitaki Br.—4. 1.
5. Mahop. 2. 18 – 20.

The Upaniṣads nowhere mention the extent of the Videha country and so it is difficult to fix her territorial limits. But in later works, the extent of the Videhadeśa is referred to, which included the present districts of Muzaffarpur, Darbhangā and Champārana with South-eastern Nepāl.[6]

As regards the time of the establishment of the Videha country as described in the Upaniṣads we have two standards to fix the period in question. One is the literary evidence and the chronology of the Vedic literature and the next is the genealogical history of ancient India as preserved in the Purāṇas. The latter sources are confusing and have no scientific background, so we have to depend more on the evidences of the literary chronology. The Upaniṣads are the last portion of the Vedas but scholars are divided on the date of these books. Ludwig's view that the antiquity of the Upaniṣads goes back to the 3,000 B. C., seems to be fantastic though the jerms of the philosophical thoughts may probably be so old but not the Upaniṣads as the Books. Pt. Balakrishna Dixita has pushed back their date to the 2,500 B. C. on the ground of the astrological data as preserved in the Upaniṣads.[7] This also seems not to be logical as only the astrological data are not sufficient to fix the date of a particular work. B. G. Tilak thinks that the antiquity of the Upaniṣads goes back to 1600 B. C. His contention is based on the comparative perusal of the Upaniṣadic astrological data with the same in the *Vedāṅga-Jyotiṣa.*[8] His view also falls in line with those of Ludwig and Dixita. According to Maxmuller the *Maitryūpaniṣad* is a pre-Pāṇinian Upaniṣad in which we get many quotations from the Upaniṣads like the *Chāndogya*, *Bṛhad*, *Taittirīya*, *Kaṭha* and *Īśa*, so undoubtedly these quoted Upaniṣads are either contemporary or more probably older than the *Maitryūpaniṣad.* The date of Pāṇini is generally accepted as the 5th century B. C. He uses the word "Upaniṣad" in the sense of the book of that name.[9] The *Gaṇa-pāṭha,*[10] of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* clearly shows that either prior to him or during his time commentaries were being written on the Upaniṣads. So it may rightly be presumed that the date of the earliest Upaniṣads is the pre-Buddhist period. Some of the views of these books were preached and advanced later by the Buddha. The period from the eighth to sixth century B. C., was of much importance. The Brāhmaṇas only were not the undisputed masters of knowledge, and the Vedic Karmamārga (*i.e.*, the

6. Thakur, Op. cit. (for details).
7. Sank. SSI. p. 110.
8. Ibid. p. 111-112.
9. Astādhyāyi, 4. 3, 73.
10. Ibid. 4. 3, 129.

rituals) was not regarded as fruitful. The authorities of these both were challenged by the Kṣatriyas, and all there deliberetions regarding *Jñāna* finally took concrete shape probably at the time of the advent of the Buddha. But prior to him we get references to many kṣatriya philosophers like Ajātasatru of Kāśi, Aśvapati of the Kekaya country, the Pañchāla king Jaibalir Pravāhaṇa and the most prominent of all the Janak of Videha, who were the predecessors of the Buddha and even the Brāhmaṇa philosophers of the time come to them to gain knowledge.[11] Now, on the basis of these evidences we may fix the date of the earliest Upaniṣads during the eigth-sixth century B. C. The *Bṛd.* alone mentions the Videha country which is one of the earliest Upaniṣads, so the history of Mithilā as described in the Upaniṣads is of the period at least from the 8th century B. C. onword.

In the *Bṛd.* Janaka has been mentioned as the king of the Videha country, who was a great patron of scholars and a great philosophers himself. He was well known for his generosity to the philosophers. Ajātaśatru, the Kāśi King had requested Gārgaya Bālāki not to go to Janaka and to remain with him as he was ready to offer thousands of cows for which Janaka was famous.[12] This simple event shows the interest of the Videha king in the advancement of learning, whose material prosperity facilitated the growth of Indian philosophy. He occupied the highest position for his scholarship among his contemporaries of the equal designation. He was not merely a patron of scholars but also a great religious king who performed the Bahudakṣiṇā[13] sacrifice in which the Brāhmaṇas even from the distant lands also were invited. The Kuru and the Pāñchāla Brāhmaṇas had come io take part in the performance of that sacrifice.[14] Since the earliest times Mithilā has remained as one of the strongholds of the Vedic Karmakāṇḍa and the same is seen during the time of the Upaniṣads also.

The Vedic rituals were vehemently criticised and were regarded as fruitless,[15] yet the Vedic King Janaka did not abandon the Vedic injunctions and performed the sacrifice on a large scale. The king offered cows and gold to the Brāhmaṇas. But the most interesting feature of that sacrifice was the holding of a learned debate by king Janaka in order to know the most prominent philosopher and scholar (*Brahmavida*) among the Brāhmaṇas assembled on that occasion. He had declared the

11. Brd. 2. 1, 1-20., Chāndogya. 1. 8-9 Khandas.
12. Ibid. 2. 1, 1. Kansitaki 4, 1.
13. Ibid. 3. 1, 1.
14. For details, see Thakur, Op. cit.; Chap. iii.
15. Muṇḍaka, 1. 2, 7.

prize of one thousand cows for the most prominent *Brahmavida.*[16] This announcement was an open challenge to the learned scholars; and Yājñavalkya came forward and accepted the challenge to prove himself as the best *Brahmavida* but the other scholars did not accept him to be so; and a large number of them discussed with him on various aspects of philosophy. Those who questioned him were Ārtabhāga, Lāhyāyanī Bhujpa, Chākrāyaṇa Uṣasta, Kauṣitakeya Kahola, Gārgī the daughter of Vacaknuki, Āruṇī Uddālaka and Śākalya. Yājñavalkya with the help of his dominating superb knowledge and excellent logic defeated them one by one and proved himself as the best philosopher.[17] This event also shows that Janaka was a patron of learning and contributed his share to the cause of the advancement of philosophy by holding learndd discussions and offering prizes to the victorious ones.

Perhaps the victory of Yājñavalkya over his contemporaries brought him nearer to Janaka who became his closest friend and patronised him in his court. He always held discussions with him on the philosophical subjeets. The Bṛd.[18] shows that Janaka was like the king Milinda in his intuition and desire of gaining knowledge and Yājñavalkya was like Nāgasena in his vast philosophical knowledge.[19] Yājñavalkya was the most prominent scholar of his time. He had obtained knowledge from the famous Āchāryas, namely, Jitvā, the son of Śilina, Udaṅka, the son of Śulva, Varku the son of Vṛṣṇa, Gardavivipita of Bhāradvāja Gotra, Satyakāma-Jābāla and from Śākalya vidagdha.[20] The Upaniṣads do not throw light on his personal life except that he had two wives namely Maitreyi and Kātyāyanī.[21] He spent his Gārhasthika life for a long time, remained in the court of Janaka and at last offered Saṁyāsa.[22]

The most difficult problem is the identification of Janaka as we know that this name was a defuastic title of the kings. The *Bṛd.* does not say any thing about from the Purāṇas we learn that Janaka of the *Bṛd.* is Kṛti Janaka, the 19th king in the line of the Sīradhvaja Janaka.[23] This Janaka was a close friend of Yājñavalkya, who was a disciple of Hiraṇyanābha Kauśalya[24] It is known from the Viṣṇu Purāṇa that Kṛti also

16. Brd., 3. 1, 1.
17. Ibid. 3. 1, 3-9 Brāhmanas.
18. Ibid. 4. 1, 1.
19. Milinda-Panho.
20. Brd. 4. 1, 2-7.
21. Ibid. 4. 5, 1., 2. 4, 1.
22. Ibid. 4. 5, 1., 2. 4, 1.
23. Pradhan, Chronology of Ancient India, pp. 138-141; Thakur Op. cit. Chap. iii.
24. Visnu-Purāna, III, 6, 7.

was a disciple of Hiraṇyanābha.[25] The Vāyu. confirms that Kṛti was the son of a king "Nṛpātmaja" and was the pupil of Hiraṇyanābha. Thus we see that Kṛti Janak is the Janaka of the *Bṛd.* and was the classmate of Yājñavalkya, perhaps this was the reason of the future intimacy between the two. Yājñavalkya had defeated Uddālaka, the son of Aruṇa in the discussion held on the occasion of the performance of the Vahudakṣiṇa yajña by Janaka.[26] He (Uddālaka) and a certain veda were class friends.[27] Janamejaya Parīkṣita had requested veda to become his priest in the Nāgasatra.[28] So, Uddālaka Āruṇī, Janamejaya Parīkṣita, Veda, Hiraṇyanābha, Yājñavalkya and Janaka Kṛti were contemporaries to each other. Ajātaśatru, the Kāśī king and Jaibalī Pravāhaṇa, the Pāñchāla king were the contemporaries of Janaka Kṛti. Svetaketu, the son of Uddālaka Āruṇī and Kauṣitaki Kahoda discussed with Yājñavalkya.[29] The *Mbh.* informs that Kahoda was the pupil and son-in-law of Uddālaka, the father of Śvetaketu.[30]

The Upaniṣads do not give informations regarding the condition of the people during the time of Janaka, but with the help of some scanty references we may say that the king loved his subjects, he was the patron of learning and performed the Yajña for his welfare and for the well being of his subjects also. The *Bṛd.* furnishes some important information regarding this subject. It shows that the king visited the villages within his territories and during the king's tour the ugrakarmā Sūta and the Elders of the village arranged for king's comforts like Boarding and lodging, they waited on him and accompanied him in his tours.[31] The Ugrakarmā Sūta has been designated as the officer-in-charge of the village administration along with the elders in the village. The king visited the villages for getting first hand knowledge of the people's condition in order to remove difficulties for performing more welfare works for them. The Sūta has been regarded as the Ugrakarmā the performer of the ferotious works. It seems that the Ugrakarmā Sūta was a police officer to look after the safety of the villagers from the dacoits and the evil-doers, so naturally his works were *Ugra*. The Brāhmaṇas, namely the *Śatapatha*, *Tai-ttirīya* and the *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* mention the Sūta as one of the

25. Vāyu Purāna, 61, 64.
26. Brd. III, 7.
27. Mbh. 1. 3, 21-22.
28. Ibid. 1. 3, 42.
29. Brd. 3. 5, 1., 3. 7, 1-3.
30. Mbh. 3. 132 ch.
31. Brd. 4. 3, 37-38.

eleven Ratninṣ. In the Mauryan civil list of the *Arthaśāstra* he is placed among minor officers who got 1000 a year. He is the later histriographer whom Yuwan Chwang found in the empire of Harṣa whose duty was to register good and evil events. But during the earliest times his works were related to the administration of the villages as the Bṛd. shows. It seems that during the Upaniṣadic period he was a police-cum-civil officer in charge of the village administration. More than this we get nothing regarding the political condition and more details may not be naturally expected from the Upaniṣads regarding this matter but we may rightly say that every thing went well.

Scanty references to social condition are also found. A general study of the *Bṛd.* shows that the people of the Videha country were more peaceful and inclined to learning, but it was not enough. They were skilled archers and soldiers and well known for being unrivalled fighters in the battle field.[32] The Purāṇas, the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* also confirm the same thing.[33] They were equally well versed both in pen and sword, and due to these two characteristics the Videhas distinguished themselves from their contemporaries.

The society was organised on the basis of the traditional system of the Varṇa and Āśrama. The Brāhmaṇas and the Kṣatriyas had secured the highest position in the society. It is a special characteristic of the age that the Kṣatriyas equalled themselves with the Brāhmaṇas in the spiritual knowledge and the latter came to the former for solving their doubts. As a class the Brāhmaṇas were much respected due to their scholarship.

The position of woman was fairly high. Poligamy was in prevelance and even a philosopher like Yājñavalkya had two wives named Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī.[34] The wives were the equal heirs in the husband's property and during his life time the husband could divide the property between the two wives provided he wished to offer Saṃyās.[35] But material prosperity was not all in all as was the view of Maitreyī who declined to have share in her husband's property and requested him to impart spiritual knowledge to her which was the permanent source of happiness and the means of salvation.[36] The women were not only the Gṛhaswāminis but were highly educated and challenged the great philosophers

32. Ibid. 3. 8, 2.
33. Vāl. Rām. 1. 70, 2-3., Sabda-Kalpadruma, Part III, p. 723.
34. Brd. 4. 5, 1., 2. 4, 1.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.

also. Maitreyī, the wife of Yājñavalkya was a Brahmavādinī.[37] Likewise Gārgī, the daughter of Vachaknukī was the most prominent woman philosopher of her time whose intellect and scholarship are well preserved in the *Bṛd.*[38] Her discussion with yājñavalkya shows that the women were highly educated. Yājñavalkya the unrivalled philosopher at last threatened her with the bad consequences of the *Atipraśna* and thus silenced her,[39] who spoke of him as bing unparalleled in the philosophical knowledge as no one was able to defeat him.[40] These are only a few examples which show the high position of the women in the society; who could study the Vedas and discussed with tne male scholars in open learned debates. It seems that there were no purdah and illiteracy among the women.

The people gave more attention to education. The common type of education is not referred to, yet Yājñavalkya has advanced a principle heard from his father that the teacher should not accept any thing in the form of the gift offered by the pupils prior to the completion of their education, and this statement occurs six times in the *Bṛd.*[41] This was the principale of imparting education to the students and thus certainly the poor economic condition was never a hindrance to the academic career of a man. The teachers performed selfless service to the society. The advancement of learning did not lag behind due to lack of fund. The teachers were never to suffer from hunger because they were supported by the State. We have seen that in the Yajñas the kings offered cows and gold to the Brāhmaṇas and on many other occasions also they got the same. The king's doors were always open to the scholars for their financial support.[42] The adequate State support for the advancement of learning was the main reason for the growth of philosophy. A large number of the subjects were taught as the Four Vedas Itihāsa, Purāṇa, Vidyā, Upaniṣada, Śloka, Sūtra, Anuvyākhyāna and Vyākhyāna etc.[43] Though it is not mentioned but the Āśramas of the sages were the popular centres of learning. It may be assumed that the percentage of literacy was very high in the Videha country.

The means of recreation are also referred to. Dundubhī, Sankh

37. Ibid.
38. Brd. 3. 6, 1., 3. 8, 1-2. For details see Thakur, Op. cit, Chap. iii.
39. Ibid. 3. 6, 7.
40. Ibid. 3. 8, 12.
41. Ibid. 4. 1, 2-4.
42. Ibid. 2. 1, 1., 4. 1, 1-7.
43. Ibid, 2. 4, 10., 4. 1, 2.

and Vīṇā[44] have been mentioned by the sage Yājñavalkya. Those were played upon for producing sweet sounds for recreation. Vīṇā is one of the most ancient musical instruments and was of two types, known as the Vāṇa and Vīṇā respectively. The former type had 100 strings.[45] The Sāmaveda mentions 5 types of the Vīṇā named Alābū Vakrā, Kapiśīrṣā, Mahāvīṇā and Śālavīṇā. Perhaps all these types were known to the people during the Upaniṣadic age also. Saṅkha and Dundubhī also were well known musical instruments of hoary antiquity and had religious importance also.

Though there are no direct references to the economic condition of the Videha country in the Upaniṣads yet we get some ideas indirectly. The performance of the Bahudakṣiṇa yajña by the videha king Janaka shows that the country was rich and the Rājakośa had abundance of wealth because a king with his right budget could not perform it.[46] He offered cows to the Brāhmanas in thousands of number[47] and requested Yājñavalkya on many occasions to accept cows which gave birth to oxen equal in strentgh to the elephants.[48] This shows that the Videha country had the best type of the cattle wealth and the state took much care of the welfare of the cattle. The fertile soil of the Videha country yielded foodgrains. The country was rich. Trade and commerce were not neglected. The *Brd.* mentions the bullock carts with beavy loads.[49] Chariots and the boats were the means of communication.[50]

The Society had passed the experimental stage of the coin-evolution and gold coins were in use as Ten *Svarṇa-Pādas* were tied to the horns of each of the 1000 cows offered by Janak to the most prominent Brāhmavida on the occasion of the performance of the Bahudakṣiṇa sacrifice.[51] Svarṇapāda certainly was 1/4th of the then complete one gold coin. On the evidence of *Pāṇini*[52] it may be said that during his times also the Svarṇa was a type of the gold coin and the person possessing two svarṇa was known as the *Dvisvarṇadhanaha*. Svarṇa as it seems was a manufactured gold coin. Accorbing to Kauṭilya the weight of Svarṇa

44. Ibid. 2. 4, 9-10., 4. 5, 9-10.
45. Vedic Index (Keith), Part II, p. 283.
46. Brd. 3. 1, 1.
47. Ibid. 3. 1, 2.
48. Ibid. 4. 1, 1-7.
49. Ibid. 4. 3, 34., 4. 5, 11.
50. Ibid. 4. 2, 1., 4. 3, 10.
51. Ibid. 3. 1, 1-2.
52. Astādhyāyi, 6. 2. 55.

was one Korṣa ie, 150 grains or 80 Guñjas. He refers to Sauvarṇika and Rupyasuverṇama many times in the Arthaśāstra.[53] The Udaya Jataka mentions the Suvarṇamā-ṣaka. Kauṭilya informs that Māṣa is the 1/16th part of the karṣa so it was of 5 Rattis, thus the Svarnapāda was of 4 Māṣas or of 20 Rattis.[54] So the Svarṇa was a manufactured coin of gold and was used in daily life of transactions. Its antiquity goes back at least up to the 8th centuary B. C. Thus we see that the Videha country was very rich and its economic prosperity was the main reason for its advancement in the academsc field as only the prosperous people can give their best attention to this subject.

In due course, the Ṛgvedic simple sacrifices became very complicated and the people lost the real meaning of the religion. The Upaniṣads are a reaction against the Karmakāṇḍa of the Vedas and the *Munḍakopɔniṣad* denouces the Vedic sacrifices as fruitless. Yet inspite of this criticism the people in the Videha country had their unshakable faith in the vedic rituals.[55] It was believed that the persons may get Immortality with the help of Agni and vāka,[56] who were the vedic Gods. We have seen that even Janaka, the Jñanī king had performed the Bahudakṣiṇa sacrifice on a large scale. The five performers of the yajña namely the Yajamāna, Ṛtvika, Aḍhvaryu, Udagātā and Hoā, and the three types of the Ṛchās to be recited on the occasion of the performation of the sacrifices, are referred to.[57] It was popularly believed that the performer of the Aśvamedha goes to the heaven.[58]

The people had faith in one, three, thritythree and in 3303 gods, but the most prominent were only the 33 gods namely the eight Vasus, eleven Rudras, Twelve Ādityas, Indra and Prajāpati respectively.[59] They believed that the birth and death occur only due to the karma[60] which is the main basis for the attainment of the Lokas namely the Devloka, the Pitṛloka and the Manuṣyaloka.[61] The nature of the Brahma and of the soul are well described by Yājñavalkya in his discussions with Āruṇīuddālaka.[62] and with Gārgī.[63] The soul is Immortal,[64] Agrāhya, Aspṛsya, Asaṁga and Avaddha.[65] The Brahma is Aparimeya, unmeasurable; Dhruva, Immovable; Nirmal, Pure; Sukṣma, not easily to be seen;

53. Arthasāstra, 2. 13-14 Chapters.
54. Ibid. 2. 19, 2-4.
55. Brd., 3. 1, 1-2.
56 Ibid., 3. 1; 3.
57, Ibid., 3. 1, 3-10.
58. Ibid. 3. 1, 3-10.
59. Ibid. 3. 3, 1-2.
60. Ibid. 3. 2, 10-13.
61. Ibid. 3. 1. 6-8.
62. Ibid. 3. 7, 2-15.
63. Ibid; 3. 8, 1-19.
64. Idid 3. 4, 1-2.
65. Ibid. 4. 2; 3-4.

Ajanmā; Mahāna and Avināśī, the Brahma connot be realised by verbal talks as it is only the exercise of the mouth.[66]

The fundamental philosophy of the *Brd.* which embodies the views of yājñavalkya, the Great philosopher in the court of Janaka is that renunciation is the condition of the attainment of Immortality. The temporal and the sensual objects are like the Grahas which give sufferings to the people.[67] So, for getting permanent happiness it is necessary to discard the desires.[68] Later on the Buddha also advanced the same principle *i.e.,* discard the desires for the attainment of Nirvāṇa.

Thus, this is the picture of Mithilā, the Videha country of the upaniṣads. She witnessed during this period a gallaxy of scholars, advancement of learning, economic prosperity, religious ferments, social developments and of all the reign of the philosopher king Janaka Kṛti. No country except Videha is described in such a detail and it was certainly on account of her prominence among other countries from which she distinguised herself in many respects.

Abbreviations :

Sat. *Br.*—*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa.*
Bṛd.—*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣada.*
Mbh.—*The Mahābhārata.*
Vāl. Rām.—*The Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa.*
Sank. SSI.—*Saṁskrita Sāhitya* ka *Saṁkṣipta Itihāsa.*

66. Ibid. 4. 4, 18-22.
67. Ibid. 3. 1, 6-8.
68. Ibid. 4. 5, 1-15.